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Managerial Power in the German Model: The Case of Bertelsmann and the Antecedents of Neoliberalism

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ABSTRACT

Our article extends the research on authoritarian neoliberalism to Germany, through a history of the Bertelsmann media corporation – sponsor and namesake of Germany’s most influential neoliberal think-tank. Our article makes three conceptual moves. Firstly, we argue that conceptualizing German neoliberalism in terms of an ‘ordoliberal paradigm’ is of limited use in explaining the rise and fall of Germany’s distinctive socio-economic model (Modell Deutschland). Instead, we locate the origins of authoritarian tendencies in the corporate power exercised by managers rather than in the power of state-backed markets imagined by ordoliberals. Secondly, we focus on the managerial innovations of Bertelsmann as a key actor enmeshed with Modell Deutschland. We show that the adaptation of business management practices of an endogenous ‘Cologne School’ empowered Bertelsmann’s postwar managers to overcome existential crises and financial constraints despite being excluded from Germany’s corporate support network. Thirdly, we argue that their further development in the 1970s also enabled Bertelsmann to curtail and circumvent the forms of labour representation associated with Modell Deutschland. Inspired by cybernetic management theories that it used to limit and control rather than revive market competition among its workforce, Bertelsmann began to act and think outside the postwar settlement between capital and labour before the settlement’s hotly-debated demise since the 1990s.

Keywords: Authoritarian neoliberalism; Bertelsmann; managerialism; ordoliberalism; *Modell Deutschland*

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Introduction

Our article takes up the core concerns of the nascent scholarship on ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (AN). Mobilizing the work of Stuart Hall and Nicos Poulantzas, the major contribution of this literature has been to highlight the disciplinary, coercive and anti-democratic governance practices that political actors have used in the wake of the global and European financial crises to curtail opposition and close down alternatives (Bruff, 2014, 2016). Crucially for scholars of AN, it is these practices that make neoliberalism much more pernicious and persistent than the free market programmatic frequently attributed to it by both proponents and sceptics (Bruff, 2016, p. 107; Tansel, 2017). The emancipatory purpose of AN is to lift the veil of this liberal rhetoric to reveal new mechanisms and techniques of rule and potential points of resistance that are too often swallowed up by the master narrative of ‘the market’.

Building on the recognition of the spatially and temporally variegated character of AN (e.g. Rioux, 2016), this article extends this line of investigation to Germany. The German experience is of interest for two reasons. First, it has been the focus of long-standing debates about the roles of state power and market forces in the constitution of a distinct but possibly fading German model (*Modell Deutschland*) of capitalism (e.g. Thelen, 2014). And second, the German state has assumed a domineering role in the eurocrisis that some have likened to ‘an authoritarian mode of action’ (Biebricher, 2013, p. 345).

The most prominent way to link the specificity of Germany to its dominance in the EU has been to invoke an ordoliberal paradigm. Idolizing the strong state *and* free market, this variant of neoliberal thought is said to have shaped Germany’s ‘social market economy’ after 1945 and to inform its contemporary crisis response (Blyth, 2013; Bonefeld, 2012; Young, 2014). This literature has revealed an intriguing correspondence between ordoliberal principles and

EU governance practices (e.g. Wigger and Buch-Hansen, 2015) and the deleterious consequences of German crisis management (Ryner, 2015). And yet to us, the assumed fixity of ordoliberal dogma seems less able to explain either the specific social transformation of German capitalism after 1945 or the novel, if regressive, reforms that have undone these achievements since the 1990s. Thus, rather than search for continuity in the realm of ideas, our article proposes to examine the evolving socio-economic strategies and struggles of actors embedded in and yet reshaping the German social model. Building on contributions that examine the connections between business management and the rise of neoliberalism (Davies, 2014; Knafo et al., 2018; Styhre, 2014), this article zooms in on the managerial innovations of the Bertelsmann AG – one of the world’s largest media conglomerates.

The reasons for this choice are threefold. First, Bertelsmann is the corporate sponsor behind Germany’s foremost think-tank, the Bertelsmann Foundation. In the eyes of many, the Foundation emerged as the key protagonist in the transformation of *Modell Deutschland* since the 1990s, most often in ways that have diminished its social and democratic features (Barth, 2006; Bauer, 2009; Biermann & Klönne, 2008; Böckelmann & Fischler, 2004; Schuler, 2010; Wernicke & Bultmann, 2007). There is, moreover, widespread agreement that the aims and methods of the Foundation have been shaped fundamentally by the corporate culture and management style of the Bertelsmann company (Schuler, 2010, pp. 14-21). In fact, the very *raison d’être* of the charity – created and headed by the firm’s patriarch, Reinhard Mohn – has been to apply the approaches and achievements of his business to the German state and society (Fleishman, 2001, p. 133).

Second, while its social foundation is considered a neoliberal lodestar, the corporate history of Bertelsmann is deeply enmeshed in the preceding period of postwar reconstruction and the specificities of the *Modell Deutschland*. For many scholars, ‘Bertelsmann epitomises the West German postwar economic miracle’ (Fitzgerald, 2012, pp. 266-267), with Mohn representing a younger generation of managers who broke with the archaic forms of organization and leadership of the German business elite and transformed their businesses into multinationals (Berghahn, 1986; Ewing, 2014, p. 18). Among these corporations, thirdly and finally, Bertelsmann stands out by virtue of a uniquely adaptive management style. What set its corporate culture apart ‘from nearly all other management concepts in the early Federal Republic of Germany was the “radicalness” with which it embraced the element of permanent change’ (Wischermann, 2010, p. 262). Because it connects to both the rise of the German model after 1945 and its deconstruction in the 1990s, Bertelsmann’s corporate history throws

an innovative sidelight on the trajectory of German neoliberalism and its tendentially authoritarian characteristics.

Our argument proceeds in three steps. The next section identifies some of the promises and pitfalls of the ordoliberal narrative, and outlines an alternative account which locates elements of authoritarian rule within corporate strategies and the managerial innovations of Bertelsmann in particular. In keeping with the emphasis within AN on hierarchies and inequalities rather than markets, we argue that these practices represent instruments of control and empowerment rather than means of market rule. Against the image of an externally-generated movement towards neoliberalism, the third section identifies the roots of a German management tradition of accounting practices and profit incentives pioneered at Cologne University in the interwar period. In the immediate postwar years, this helped Bertelsmann establish an operational basis for its growing business when facing an existential crisis of financial constraints and excessive growth. The third section shows how, facing the limits of these techniques in the 1970s, Bertelsmann turned to cybernetic management theories in order to limit, rather than revive, competition amongst its workforce. While introduced in the name of social progress, these practices were meant to curtail the more institutionalized versions of collective bargaining and co-determination of *Modell Deutschland* long before its hotly-debated demise. It is in this history that we can find the origins and complex objectives of the societal blueprint Bertelsmann introduced through its foundation in the 1990s. Our conclusion situates our argument within the broader literature on neoliberalism and managerialism. It outlines the advantages of searching for their authoritarian features within changing corporate strategies rather than unchanging ordoliberal ideology.

German Neoliberalism: An Ordoliberal Legacy?

The most popular approach to discerning the authoritarian tendencies of German neoliberalism zooms in on a peculiar economic doctrine called ‘ordoliberalism’. This German variety of neoliberal thought was conceived in the interwar period by a circle of economists associated with the so-called Freiburg School as a ‘third way’ between *laissez-faire* capitalism and potentially totalitarian economic planning. To its advocates, ordoliberalism prescribes a central but legally demarcated role for the state in sustaining a competitive market order based on price stability, fiscal sobriety, and monetary restraint (Ptak, 2009, p. 100). Its critics,

however, identify a latent authoritarianism that *combines* the tyranny of the market with that of the state. State power, in the ordoliberal imagination, is to be used to submit social actors to the logic of the market, to defend its price-finding function from popular ‘interference’, and to inculcate in the individual an ethos to contend with the forces of supply and demand (Biebricher, 2013, pp. 341-342; Bonefeld, 2012, pp. 5, 9). Political authority, in short, imposes an ‘order of competition’ at the expense of democratic participation, collective enterprise, and redistributive forms of welfare (cf. Wigger & Buch-Hansen, 2015, p. 85).

The corresponding narrative holds that Germany’s postwar social market economy was built on the basis of this ordoliberal paradigm after 1945 (for a nuanced analysis, see Dyson, 2001). Although there is considerable disagreement over how much of ordoliberal thought was carried over into the postwar era (cf. Bonefeld, 2012; Berghahn & Young, 2013), many – though not all (cf. Hartmann, 2015, p. 125) – of its proponents suggest that since the crisis of Keynesianism of the 1970s, this paradigm has become a project that German state elites have aimed to realize at the European level (Art, 2015; Blyth, 2013, p. 101; Matthijs, 2016).

While focused on illuminating German-led austerity and the rigid surveillance and enforcement apparatus of post-crisis Europe (see Biebricher & Vogelmann, 2017), the principal advantage of this account lies in its potential to uncover an internally generated rather than externally imposed neoliberal trajectory (Dyson, 2001, p. 140). This corrects a line of reasoning which holds that Germany simply followed a global neoliberal transition in the 1990s. By drawing attention to a homegrown ideology of state-led and market-centred governance, the ordoliberal narrative goes some distance towards understanding the diverse sources, multiple trajectories, and varied forms of neoliberalism (cf. Bruff, 2008).

However, the key problem, as we see it, is that many ordoliberal accounts are so focused on the current crisis that they neglect the past. Because their explanatory value rests squarely on the presumed continuity of ordoliberal thought, they tend to exaggerate its original influence on Germany’s postwar political economy. To be sure, ordoliberal arguments served as an important antidote to more far-reaching postwar plans for socialization and interventionism (Ptak, 2009). And yet in order to become acceptable again after 1945, capitalism had to be rendered ‘social’ in ways that marked a profound departure from ordoliberal precepts in several respects. In the place of the reactionary and proto-fascist exonerations of the state that shine through in key ordoliberal texts, a liberal-democratic, parliamentary and federal constitution was created (Berghahn and Young, 2013; Young, 2014). In like manner, the aversion to social policy within the ordoliberal canon was replaced by a redistributive welfare state (Manow, 2001). Additionally, from an ordoliberal standpoint,

both the reconcentration of economic power in a tightly-knit network of big banks and industrial firms, and the inclusion of organized labour through corporatist arrangements would have to be judged as inadmissible ‘conspiracies against the market’ (Berghahn, 2010, pp. 5-6; Hien, 2013, p. 350; Nicholls, 1994, pp. 335-336). Lastly, the ‘massification’ of German culture and consumption, while part and parcel of the postwar economic miracle, was diametrically opposed to the social conservative ideal of a society of craftsmen and artisans that ordoliberal thinkers such as Wilhelm Röpke held on to (cf. Gööck, 1968, p. 184).

In our view, these and numerous other examples demonstrate the critical difference between ordoliberalism in theory and the social market economy in practice. Taking the former as a guide to Germany’s postwar development risks missing out on some of its most distinctive features – especially the incorporation of organized labour – that have come under strain during the neoliberal era. Yet without a clear sense of what social institutions were established, we cannot fully understand how far, in what ways, and by whom they may have been eroded.

In sum, there is no shortcut which takes us from the Freiburg School writings in the interwar period to the present. If we are to understand the contours of German neoliberalism and its authoritarian features, we need to work our way through the postwar history of and social struggles over German capitalism (see also Cozzolino in this special issue on Italy). Rather than debate the degree to which ordoliberal ideas were ‘lost in translation’ after 1945 (Hien & Joerges, 2017) or experienced an ‘unlikely renaissance’ (Biebricher, 2013, p. 339) some decades later, we propose to focus on actors that had to manoeuvre within the social market economy as it actually existed, while at the same time contributing significantly to its transformation. We believe that Bertelsmann offers a productive focal point not only due to its social foundation becoming extraordinarily influential since the early 1990s, but also because its business history is intimately connected with the postwar reconstruction of German capitalism and the contestations between capital and labour during its evolution (Schreyögg et al., 2011, p. 95).

The next section thus analyzes the corporate strategies and socio-economic context of Bertelsmann’s surge to power. We argue that its postwar success depended on managerial innovations which we trace back to a ‘Cologne School’ of business management, and which became vital because Bertelsmann lacked the corporate and financial support network that many established German companies enjoyed. Placed at one remove from the German model due to its newcomer status and peculiar business plan, these managerial practices enabled

Bertelsmann to circumvent and fundamentally rethink its constitutive capital/labour compromise.

The Cologne Roots of Bertelsmann's Surge to Power

Critical scholarship on Bertelsmann does much to dispel the rhetoric of the long-standing 'social mission' of Bertelsmann by revealing the corrosive impact of its reforms, the megalomania of its patriarch, and the complicity of his firm as propagandist and profiteer of German fascism (e.g. Böckelmann & Fischler, 2004). And yet, quite where Bertelsmann's wider vision comes from, and what it seeks to accomplish, tends to be underspecified. Too often, the inquiry has been guided by some version of Berghahn's 'Americanization of German business' thesis. Accordingly, Mohn is portrayed as 'the Alfred P. Sloan of publishing' (Gerschon, 1996; cf. "Reinhard Mohn", 1987), modelling his firm on the business practices of General Motors (Wischermann, 2010, p. 261) and his think-tank on the Ford Foundation (Schuler, 2010, pp. 34-37). By contrast, our article takes up the ordoliberal proposition of *internal* impulses to reform along neoliberal lines, reaching further back into Germany's history than previously recognized. Rather than an exegesis of ordoliberal texts, however, we identify a German managerial tradition of 'ruling by numbers' that had developed independently from the US during the 1920s (Fear, 2005), and that came to define Bertelsmann's approach to capital-labour relations inside the firm and in German society at large (Bundesmann-Jansen & Pekruhl, 1992).

The engine of Bertelsmann's rapid postwar expansion is widely seen to be the mass-market book club. It offered its members a selection of titles at a considerable discount in exchange for a monthly subscription fee (Wössner, 1988, p. 150). Its secret of success lay in the innovative use of the door-to-door sales and mail-order publishing business which aggressively broadened its client base (Holtmann, 2008; Schreyögg et al., 2011, p. 89; "Die Bestsellerfabrik", 1957). Though critical to Bertelsmann's worldwide success, the exorbitant growth of its membership posed logistical and financial challenges that pushed the firm to the brink of collapse (Berghoff, 2013b, p. 859). Cut off from finance because book club subscriptions were not recognized as collateral (Gerschon, 1996, p. 174; Tietz, 1985, p. 345; Wössner, 1988, p. 151), Bertelsmann lacked *Modell Deutschland's* distinctive bank-based support network, commonly credited for corporate Germany's postwar success.

Despite the often-repeated claims by Mohn to have been influenced by American business practices (e.g. Wischermann, 2010, pp. 260-261), our research suggests that in this moment of exponential growth and existential crisis, Bertelsmann instead searched for more immediate solutions that were much closer to home. Confirming the intuition of Berghoff (2013b, p. 866), our archival research reveals an as-of-yet unexplored connection to the German coal and steel industry via the person of Dr Willi Schoess. Hired in April 1955 to oversee and control the financial operations of Bertelsmann (Spiegel, 1957), what makes Schoess such a critically important figure is that he belongs to two influential and intersecting, distinctively German circles of business management theory and practice.

A student of business economics at the University of Cologne, Schoess was educated in the ‘accounting and management tradition surrounding Eugen Schmalenbach’ (Fear, 2005, p. 522). In the interwar period, Schmalenbach had pioneered a new standard of accounting that emphasized the profit/loss statement as the main device for assessing the commercial success of firms or divisions over time and against one another (Fear, 2005, p. 341). His key innovation was to elevate financial questions of profitability over technical questions of productivity, which gave managers a dynamic conception of a firm’s capital use rather than a static understanding of its assets (Fear, 2005, pp. 342, 627).

Schoess recognized the managerial possibilities of these key innovations compared to the prevailing ‘bureaucratic-conservative views’ of corporate organization (Schoess, 1936, pp. 279, 280; Schoess, 1953, pp. 2, 23). He soon applied these advances at the Vereinigte Stahlwerke, a major steel conglomerate, and the neuralgic centre of business management practice influenced by Schmalenbach and led by Heinrich Dinkelbach (Fear, 2005, p. 588). After serving in Germany’s war of aggression, Schoess was rehired by Dinkelbach in 1947 to create ‘the organizational preconditions’ for the allied-mandated decartellization of the coal and steel industry (Bertelsmann Corporate Archive, 1954, p. 3).

Thus, Schoess brought with him a new set of financial accounting techniques that transformed the management of Bertelsmann and had far-reaching consequences for its future development into a multinational corporation and policy think-tank. His arrival in April 1955 started a process of corporate restructuring that began with the separation of the central firm from the publishing house and the newly created sales group (*Verlagsgemeinschaft*). The resulting two-level hierarchy was connected with a ‘tighter organisation of accounting’ and intended to provide ‘greater transparency of the numerical data necessary for executive decisions’ (Bleicher, 1985, p. 62; Gööck, 1969, p. 161). Although he left the firm six months before this reorganization was completed in 1959, Schoess was commended by Mohn for his

‘accomplishments in the construction of the accounting system of the publishing house and its subsidiary firms’ (Bertelsmann Corporate Archive, 1958, p. 1).

This reform was critical to solving Bertelsmann’s most pressing problem: the rampant growth of its book club exceeded the organizational capacities of the firm and jeopardized its financial and strategic planning. For a long time ‘the absence of proper budgeting techniques and profit and loss statements rendered the enterprise a risky venture’ (Tietz, 1985, p. 345). In this respect, the centralized accounting system Schoess introduced allowed Bertelsmann, for the first time, to take stock of its intangible assets of membership subscriptions and to explore what a company report from 1957 called ‘the still wide open frontier of an unknown market’ (quoted in Langenbucher, 1985, p. 41).

This new computational and managerial ability was also crucial in helping the firm manage the thousands of firms that acquired customers for its books. Initially tasked to recruit new and service existing customers on their own account, the marketing firms soon felt overburdened and underpaid and pushed for higher commissions and better conditions (Böckelmann & Fischler, 2004, p. 122; Tietz, 1985, p. 346). Under a new division of labour enabled by the accounting innovations, Bertelsmann reached a compromise: the sales companies not only received rent for each member they transferred to the sales group; the annual profits of the company were also divided up (Schaper, 1977, pp. 444-445). Though potentially more lucrative, this meant that the marketing agencies submitted to a centralized system of financial reporting that calculated and rewarded their relative performance (Berghoff, 2010, p. 29). This allowed Bertelsmann to gain the upper hand over an unruly but indispensable bunch of sales companies, whose intense and often dysfunctional competition with one another could now be organized, monitored, and fine-tuned in ways that would serve the interests of Bertelsmann (Lokatis, 2010).

Lastly, the new managerial tools also provided a platform for the divisionalization and subsequent diversification of Bertelsmann. Between 1955 and 1959, the company embarked on a systematic strategy of operative decentralization (Langenbucher, 1985, p. 41) that followed Schmalenbach’s prescriptions. Based on his principle of ‘delegate but supervise’ (Fear, 2005, pp. 704, 706-707), Bertelsmann transformed its subsidiaries into independent ‘profit centres’ while centralizing administrative functions such as finance, accounting, and budgeting (Bleicher, 1985, p. 62; Gööck, 1968, p. 188). This meant that their chief executives were now solely responsible for their domain while remaining subject to central supervision through financial accounting techniques (Berghoff, 2010, p. 28). One of Mohn’s close advisors recalled the ‘famous monthly enterprise statistic, developed over years according to

Reinhard Mohn's conceptions', comprising 'the financial benchmark data of the enterprise, its divisions, and the profit centres, amended by specific indicators of the factors of success of the individual operations' and providing Mohn 'with a comprehensive overview of the state of business in a very short time' (Luther, 1985, pp. 289-299; Bleicher, 1985, p. 62). The underlying power relationship was summarized by one manager, who noted '[i]f they meet their financial obligation to the company, they will have autonomy' (Berghoff, 2013a, p. 186).

Overall, an enduring, if continually evolving, system of management was built on the basis of financial accounting techniques from the Dinkensbach/Schmalenbach school, which 'remained largely exceptional until the late 1950s' (Fear, 2005, p. 737) and in the mid-1990s still set Bertelsmann apart in Germany's business world (Albers, 1995, pp. 2, 3, 4 fn. 18; Göttert, 2001; Palass, 1992, pp. 316, 322). Compared to Germany's industrial giants, which had used these managerial techniques in order to reintroduce a measure of competition and raise productivity, Bertelsmann was a medium-sized company that was only beginning to diversify its operations and expand internationally (Berghoff, 2010, p. 28). Crucially, these techniques enabled Bertelsmann to manage a still untapped consumer market based on a business model of intangible assets that few people at the time knew how to value and that put it outside the bank/industry nexus of the German model. While the toolkit has since evolved, we believe it had a lasting impact on the corporate strategy and social orientation of Bertelsmann. Because these financial accounting tools were so vital to the ability of Mohn and his chief executives to 'read' their firm and plan its expansion, they rendered Bertelsmann particularly receptive to future innovations in the field of management theory and practice. Transplanted into a nascent media corporation engaged in the mass-marketization of literary consumption, moreover, this new programmatic of 'ruling by numbers' would also enter into the image of corporate responsibility Bertelsmann developed in the face of public scrutiny and cultural criticism.

In sum, we believe to have found in these managerial forms of power the seeds of an endogenous branch of neoliberalism that originates in Cologne and which – through Bertelsmann's corporate success and a mandate to 'educate' German society – connects to the transformation of the German socio-economic model since the 1990s. How Mohn and his executives further developed this management system and defined their vision of society in response to the unruly 1970s is the subject of the next section.

Beyond Profit Incentives and Competition: Cybernetics and Managerial Power

Bertelsmann was not only one of the first companies in Germany to repurpose managerial techniques for a sustained growth offensive; it also innovated with regards to the ultimate object of management, that is the discretionary power over the labour of others. Many established German businesses only reluctantly parted with patriarchal modes of corporate governance and workplace control (Berghahn, 1986; Hilger, 2008). A large number of them fought tooth and claw against the extension of work council rights and parity co-determination that were enacted during the turbulent 1970s. Bertelsmann differed not in its opposition to these reforms, but in the managerial solutions it provided. Because it had depended on its workers as a vital source of funding, Bertelsmann had long sought new ways to incorporate, incentivize and control labour and to circumvent the institutions that defined its postwar settlement with capital in Germany. In the heated class context of the 1970s, the forms of profit-sharing and workers ‘participation’ Bertelsmann had pioneered to manage a mushrooming conglomerate and its workforce took on a wider significance.

Ostensibly, the ‘social model Bertelsmann’ promised to interpose modern management as a mediating force between capital and labour, anticipating the reforms and rhetoric Mohn would promote through his Foundation in the following years. And yet a closer look reveals that it was premised on techniques that empowered managers at the expense of the representation and self-organization of labour. While part of a broader trend across the advanced capitalist world (cf. Duménil & Lévy, 2010, p. 78), our research reveals the specific challenges that Bertelsmann addressed, and that led to a more disciplinary way out of the temporary settlement between capitalism and democracy. Thus, while shifting the geographical focus away from the Anglo-Saxon area, we also highlight the emerging gaps and cracks underneath *Modell Deutschland*, details that are sometimes obscured by common assumptions about its social and economic progress.

The material reasons for why Bertelsmann became ‘the first big company in Germany which gave its employees a share in profits’ (Schuler, 2010, p. 26) have been intimated above: Bertelsmann suffered from a chronic shortage of capital and the state levied a high tax of 60% on corporate profits. Cleverly, Mohn distributed Bertelsmann’s profits equally amongst his employees in the years from 1951 to 1955, on condition that they return them as a loan for an interest payment of 2%. This allowed Mohn to evade taxation and reinvest all of

Bertelsmann's profits (Berghoff, 2013b, p. 86). In 1955, Mohn introduced a pension scheme that followed the same principle (Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 248). At risk of missing out on the postwar boom and excluded from the established networks of German business, Mohn had to tap into his labour force in order to generate the funds necessary to sustain the expansion of his book club.

More than a tax-saving trick, the profit-sharing scheme served as a continual source of Bertelsmann's corporate expansion well into the 2000s (Berghoff, 2013b, p. 862; Jungblut, 1972). This not only spurred workers' motivation, as Mohn (1984) liked to claim (cited in Bundesmann-Jansen & Pekruhl, 1992, p. 180). As early as 1970 – two decades before the arrival of the neoliberal ideology of 'shareholder value' – these financial strategies also established profit maximization as a legitimate corporate goal (Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 251) and engaged employees as shareholders. If one took Mohn's rhetoric at the time at face value, one could think of these strategies as replacing 'order' with self-management, creativity and individualism (Lehning, 2004, p. 278), supplemented by communitarian values (for a discussion of neoliberalism and communitarianism, see Bieling, 2007). Indeed, we encounter these tropes in the 1990s with respect to the entrepreneurial subject and market-based governance that his Foundation is said to have introduced into Germany (Barth, 2007). In our view, however, these managerial innovations were borne out of immediate concerns with the success of the firm rather than an intention to restore market rule. Hence, rather than ingrain a shareholder or market mentality in the individual, the main aim of the new managerial techniques was to cut it back to size.

The problem was that the growing expansion and diversification of Bertelsmann in the 1960s and 1970s had rendered the management of the organization increasingly imprecise. Indeed, insofar as greater competition between the profit centres had been introduced, it had detrimental results for the overall coherence and profitability of the company. Mohn and his successor at the firm and Foundation, Mark Wössner, argued that profit centres might run astray from the overall corporate objective precisely because the individual might prioritize their own profits over the goals of central management (Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 262). The development of carefully calibrated and regularly audited profit and risk-sharing schemes for employees and managers were not enough (Lehning, 2004, p. 278; Bundesmann-Jansen & Pekruhl, 1992, p. 34-35). To bring workers in line with the needs and wants of the firm, new management techniques were needed.

A trained engineer, Wössner found a possible solution in cybernetic management theories (Glissmann & Peters, 2001, p. 95; Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 262), which had originated in

the USA but undergone a parallel and distinct development in German scientific and public debates after 1945 (Aumann, 2011). The core idea, as Wössner explained, was to ‘create a constantly reproducing and evolving *Regelkreis* [closed loop control]’ (cited in Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 261) that would continuously synchronize the goals of individual workers and subsidiary profit centres with an overall corporate objective and regularly adjust that objective to a rapidly changing environment (Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 263).

The overarching tool generated for that purpose was the *Sozialbilanz* (‘social stock taking’), a report that was first published in 1978 but prepared throughout the 1970s. The *Sozialbilanz* was supposed to measure how closely corporate objectives were followed in Bertelsmann’s daily operations and how far they accomplished the intended results. In cases of failure, managers could adjust the various profit-sharing schemes and means for workers participation. The aim was to establish an overall management system that could ‘learn’ from the actual operations of the company, address deficits as they occurred, and thus close any loopholes within Bertelsmann’s corporate universe (Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 261). In the eyes of its proponents, this provided a more ‘objective’ tool for setting company goals and making management decisions based on what was learned – according to Knafo et al. (2018), a core objective of new managerial strategies. Thus, we have a clear adaptation of the old, more rigid ‘ruling by numbers’ towards an evolving and decentralized ‘feedback’ system. Workers’ participation became a tool of systematic surveillance where the market incentive failed to ensure that the individual parts of the company worked as a whole.

While the *Sozialbilanz* lost its central significance in the late 1980s (Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 263), Bertelsmann has retained to this date its more traditional employee ‘suggestion system’ (*Vorschlagswesen*), which German corporations introduced at the turn of the 19th century but largely phased out in the 1960s. It enlisted individual workers in monitoring everyday operations as a way of controlling and optimizing their labour power and rewarded them for any corresponding cost savings (Wischermann, 2010, p. 242). Enshrined in a corporate constitution that promises social coherence and individual fulfilment, Bertelsmann’s corporate culture has become a ‘measuring instrument’ for upper management (Bundesmann-Jansen & Pekruhl, 1992, p. 175; Lehning, 2004, p. 278).

In sum, we argue that under the guise of increased participation, a new managerial form of continuous data collection, feedback and improvement was established which sought to ensure that new business objectives could be found and realized in a complex environment. For us, the real significance of Bertelsmann’s seemingly more ‘social’ workers’ policies lies in equipping its managers with extended powers to control labour in the interest of the firm so

that competition would not be counterproductive. At the same time, the accompanying discourse about self-fulfillment and self-responsibility provided a neat answer to public debates about labour alienation and workplace democracy in the contentious 1970s (Glißmann, 2001, pp. 94-95). It was on the basis of his unique model of workers participation that Mohn argued publicly against parity co-determination and the influence of unions in business operations (Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 252).

Management, in the vision of Mohn and sympathetic social reformers, was posited as a ‘third factor’ between capital and labour (Biedenkopf, 1985, p. 382; Glißmann, 2001, pp. 94-95). The expansion of its influence was justified by this mediating role, which appeared increasingly important the more the postwar social partnership came under strain. Internally, however, Mohn left no doubt about where he stood, rejecting even modest steps towards a democratization of the economy as giving undue weight to labour. Bertelsmann’s income sharing and participatory schemes explicitly eschewed any legally enshrined, institutionalized, and collective decision-making power in favour of a vague and unenforceable employee ‘voice’, valued for their ‘harmonising effect at the expense of trade unions’ (quoted in Wischermann, 2015, p. 173). Rather than simply defend the prerogatives of capital, however, Mohn went on the offensive. By virtue of their managerial innovations, he explained, corporations like Bertelsmann presented a superior form of organization to the slow, cumbersome, and ineffective executive of democracy (Wischermann, 2015, p. 172). Thus, by 1980 already, Mohn advocated that the techniques his firm had crafted to organize power over subordinates and their participation in the enterprise could serve as a model for redefining the role of organized labour and restructuring the state apparatus of liberal democracies.

It is from this point on that our story of Bertelsmann intersects with wider debates on managerialism as a form of neoliberal governance (Davies, 2014; Knafo et al., 2018; Styhre, 2014). With Mohn’s transition from the top of the company to the Foundation, Bertelsmann joined the ranks of consultancies and companies elsewhere that – on the back of the systematic assault on the welfare state and organized labour in the USA and UK – aimed to disseminate new ideas and techniques into public governance that were drawn from business management (Bislev, Salskov-Iversen & Hansen, 2002). Future research will need to investigate Bertelsmann’s precise influence on the implementation in Germany of what has come to be known as ‘new public management’. Here, our contribution to this literature is to highlight the need to understand how managerial answers to labour and social struggles can show the twists and turns in corporate management and its implications for (state-led)

authoritarian rule. For the principal objective of Bertelsmann's managerial innovations was never simply to introduce market competition, because it had often proved damaging to the strategies of the firm. On the contrary, the question for Mohn and his associates was about how to ensure compliance precisely because 'market-based' governance could not be trusted to lead to the aspired results (see Hagemann-Wilholt, 2016, p. 262; Knafo et. al., 2018).

Conclusion

This article has outlined the contours of a contribution that Bertelsmann has made to the neoliberal transformation of the German political economy. We find that due to its postwar expansion being difficult to finance, plan and steer, and because workers had to be brought into the firm's financial strategies from the beginning in order to ensure its survival, from early on Bertelsmann's executives came to see managerial innovations in the exercise of corporate power as the font and matrix of their success. These new techniques link back to an endogenous school of German financial accounting and, complemented by American cybernetics from the 1970s, forged a management system that emphasizes continuous control of its labour force and organizations in the name of social responsibility, workplace participation and income distribution. Long before the neoliberal turn under Thatcher and Reagan, Bertelsmann sought to retool capital-labour relations outside of the corporatist structures of *Modell Deutschland*. Thus, without denying the importance of the new management know-how which American consultancies brought to Germany (Hilger, 2000), our research has revealed an independent line of development that links Bertelsmann to a long-standing tradition of German business management. In this respect, our work goes some length in questioning the image of a global diffusion of neoliberalism, with its often implicit and sometimes explicit assumption that the USA and UK were the major centres of innovation (see also Bruff & Tansel and Harrison, in this special issue).

Unlike the putative Anglo-American emphasis on the entrepreneurial subject and a shareholder society often assumed in this literature, we argue that market-based governance was never the primary objective of Bertelsmann's managerial innovations. Instead, Bertelsmann's managers found profit incentives and competition to be counterproductive to the overall objectives of the firm and thus had to be reined in. In its own ways, Bertelsmann's corresponding managerial innovations empowered it, on the one hand, to understand and

manage the conglomerate and its labour force; on the other, they served to undercut the power of unions and work councils. It is this specific management system rather than a market model that we believe anchors both Mohn's blueprint for German society and his influential Foundation, singularly shaped by 'the leadership style and the approaches of business' (Fleishman, 2001, p. 133).

Emphasizing the specific corporate challenges of Bertelsmann, our search for the antecedents of its contribution has led us to Cologne rather than to Freiburg and yields an account that, while still requiring future research and elaboration, differs in important respects from the ordoliberal optic. First, our article approaches AN as a project to reshape German society in the image of corporate hierarchies rather than a state-imposed market order. This shift in focus not only dislodges the market as the be-all and end-all of neoliberal reform; it can also recast the capitalist state itself – including its executive and coercive apparatus – as an object of managerial reconstruction rather than a supreme authority towering above society. Most importantly in this regard, our study helps understand what state elites might have found appealing in managerial practices such as 'new public management'. If Bertelsmann's experience is anything to go by, it is the ability to exercise power in new ways rather than the dogma of the free market that is attractive. Future research along these lines ought to focus on how and why Bertelsmann's managerial innovations have made inroads into German public administration since the 1990s, a fact often stated but rarely historically analyzed.

Second, our analysis yields a more dynamic view than a narrative which conceives of the development of the German political economy in terms of an unchanging ordoliberal paradigm. Although our story also begins in the interwar period, it does not rule out that critical innovations and adaptations of the techniques handed down to Bertelsmann from this period have since occurred. As mentioned above, the types of managerial practices we identify have undergone further modifications, developing nominally 'participatory' and 'inclusive' elements that conceal the corporate hierarchies from which they flow. But while certainly more flexible and difficult to track than an ordoliberal doctrine, we believe they are no less at odds with the ideal of a society governed by and for the people and thus – from the progressive outlook of AN – it is just as vital to comprehend and contest them as well as ordoliberalism.

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